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RELATIVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF BEGINNERS IN GERMAN IN HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE¹

It is usually assumed that one year's college work in a modern foreign language is approximately equal to two year's work in high school. The student who enters college with two years of elementary foreign language ordinarily enters a class which presupposes one year of college language study. The correctness of this equation has, however, often been questioned. The writer has been much interested in this question and has attempted to find an objective basis for a comparison of the two kinds of preparatory work.

The German department of the University of Wisconsin inquires into the elementary work that each of its students has completed. My investigation has been based on statistics for the first semester 1917-18, records of previous years being no longer accessible. I have compared three classes of students: the second semester class, to which students with one year of high school German or one semester of college German are admitted, the third semester with a prerequisite of two years of high school or one year of college, and the fourth semester requiring three years of high school or one and one-half years of college preparation. I have omitted in my computations all private schools and all other colleges, because I have not wished to theorize but to speak of results in cases where I was well informed as to all the conditions.

The averages which I give are based on the standings of those students who passed. The relative number of students with high school or university training who failed or were conditioned was approximately the same. The average grades which I found were as follows:

- 1) In the second semester course the eight students with one semester of university preparation had an average standing of 79.87%, the two with high school training an average of 80.5%.
- 2) In the third semester class, the largest and therefore most important for the present issue, with two years of high school or

¹Based on a paper read before the Wisconsin Association of Modern Foreign Language Teachers, May 10, 1918. The principles involved in this paper apply to any modern foreign language. Professor H. A. Smith of the Romance department of the University of Wisconsin has very kindly given me the impression of himself and his colleagues in this matter and it coincides with the result of my statistical findings for German.

one year of university preparation, the 22 students with university training had an average of 84.04%, while the 114 with high school training were slightly lower with 83.59%.

3) In the next group, again a small one like the first, the two students with college preparation had an average of 80.5%, the 15 with high school preparation had 85.53%. The 15 with combined high school and university training stood 1.06% lower than those who came directly from the high school.

Taking all the students in these three classes together, we find that the ones coming from the high school stand 1.12% higher than their classmates from the university preparatory classes, the former averaging 83.76%, the latter 82.64%. Anticipating the objection that I had averaged up indiscriminately students from all kinds of schools I also computed the average grade of students from some of the larger cities. The larger high schools represented in this list are Milwaukee, Madison, Racine, La Crosse, Sheboygan, Fond du Lac, Beloit, Chicago, and Sioux City. One student in second semester work received 75%, 24 in third semester 84.5%, less than 1% higher than the average of all the high schools. The proportionate number of Conditions and Failures was relatively higher than in the larger group.

So much for my statistical results. The figures for the students with either sort of preparation balance to a surprising degree, no matter from what angle we look at them. There seems to be only one possible conclusion to be deduced from these facts, namely, that the practice of treating two years of high school work as approximately equal to one year of college work is upon the whole a good and just one, at least for the first two groups. The marked disparity in favor of the high school in the third group which unfortunately furnishes very meager data would seem to point to the fact that the slow growth into a foreign language develops a certain power which becomes more and more apparent as time goes on. *Sprachgefühl* is a gradual growth and not a sudden acquisition. This is one of the strongest arguments in favor of three and four year language courses in the high school.²

²Cf. the remarks of Anna T. Gronow on the advantage which children who take language in the Elementary School of the University of Chicago have over those who begin it in the high school, *MODERN LANGUAGE JOURNAL*, Dec., 1918, p. 106.

The question naturally arises as to how the college can do as much in one year as the high school in two. The following factors seem to me to furnish the answer:

1) The ratio of two to one may be maintained only if the progress of the class is not unduly impeded by weak students. In college the number of students who fail in elementary courses is relatively much larger than in later classes. During the Freshman year many students withdraw after finding that they are not fitted for college work. Thus the high school graduate who comes to the university and takes second year language must compete with Sophomores and Juniors who have been weighed and not found wanting. In addition to this he naturally experiences some difficulty in adjusting himself to his new environment. What is the situation, on the other hand, in the high school? The high school teacher who fails a student often may have to face the wrath of an irate parent, or he is penalized, as it were, by being obliged to give the weakling special help, etc. As a result no such process of natural selection as we have in college is possible, leaving aside the question of its desirability in the high school. Consequently the progress of many a high school class must be hampered by the lame and the halt.

2) The time devoted to the subject is the second factor to be considered. The high school course is generally five times a week, in college it is four, but in the latter the recitation is longer, so that here there is little or no difference. A high school assignment ordinarily requires forty minutes of preparation, a college lesson two hours or an amount three times as great as in the high school. The high school pupil spends approximately six hours and forty minutes per week on recitation and preparation, the college student eleven hours and twenty minutes. The ratio of two to one is maintained only as regards the number of class periods, not the total amount of time spent. It must never be forgotten, to be sure, that time spent in class work in elementary language study is relatively more important than time devoted to preparation.

3) My third point is the fact that the intellectual capacity and the results of intellectual work increase with the increasing maturity of a young person. An example of the acceptance of this view is furnished by the recent adoption of a plan by the Chicago Board of Education according to which a Freshman subject counts .3

point per semester, a Sophomore, Junior, and Senior subject, .4, .5, .6 respectively. If a Senior takes a Freshman subject he is allowed only .3 point. The idea is, of course, that a Freshman in the same amount of time and effort accomplishes only about half as much as the Senior. Why should a college student who is maturer by one or two years than the high school graduate not attain better results in a similar degree? This question is often answered by saying that a younger student acquires a language more easily than an older one. In fact, the belief in this myth is so prevalent that older persons are excused from the language requirements in some colleges on this plea. If I may be allowed to speak of my own experience, I have often attempted to explain to myself how it comes that mature graduate students who are taking a beginning course in German to acquire the reading knowledge necessary for the pursuit of their scientific work are invariably among the best students in the class. To be sure, these students stand above the average intellectually, but, on the other hand, they are considerably older than their classmates and they have often had no linguistic training. If there is anything in the thesis that older students learn languages with difficulty, it should apply in their case. The truth of the matter is that there is no psychological basis whatsoever for the supposition that languages are acquired by some special power of the mind that wanes in maturity.³ The older student becomes accustomed in his thinking to conscious logical grouping of facts and, if he is prejudiced against linguistic study to begin with, mistakes his disinclination to submit to the constant repetition and constant practice necessary for success in language work for inability to master the subject. Nothing of what I say here should be construed as denying the great desirability of beginning the study of a language at an early age. The many arguments in favor of this need not be rehearsed here. I have merely wished to stress the fact that children do not learn languages more easily than adults if the latter have the proper mental attitude.

In conclusion a word about the rigidity with which the ratio of two to one should be observed. While I believe that my figures have shown that the equation is in the main a just one, there can

³Cf. the excellent discussion of this point in L. Bloomfield: *The Study of Language*, pp. 296-297, Holt & Co., 1914.

be no question that it would be the worst sort of pedantry to allow no exceptions. The college teacher is interested in the rapid progress of the student to a point where he may enjoy the best that the foreign literature has to offer and the exceptional student should always be given a chance to make good in a higher course. In a large class, however, it is unfortunately a matter of several weeks before one really gets acquainted with one's students and then the student who is promoted to a more advanced class is at a disadvantage through the delay. Might it not be a good thing if the high school teacher drew the attention of the college teacher to the unusual student so that he might be given a try-out immediately? Such a plan seems perfectly feasible and it would instill in both the high school and the college teacher that feeling of mutual helpfulness which is essential for the best success of our work.

ALBERT W. ARON.

University of Wisconsin.